

'Michael Jackson: On the Wall' grapples with the singer's complicated legacy

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Written by Steve Dool, CNN

From a bell-bottomed child prodigy performing in lockstep with his siblings to a gaunt recluse marred by scandal and addiction, Michael Jackson left behind no shortage of indelible images by which he can be remembered.

But instead of highlighting Jackson's image-making prowess, "Michael Jackson: On the Wall," a new exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery, is focusing on how the contemporary artists have observed and immortalized him over the course of his lifetime. With works that offer diverse, complex and often personal interpretations of the entertainer, the gallery explores the role he continues to play in pop culture history, even nine years after his death. "Such an extraordinary array of artists has been drawn to Michael Jackson as a subject," said Nicholas Cullinan, the director of the National Portrait Gallery and the exhibition's curator. "This exhibition is not about his biography or memorabilia. It's about looking at him through the prism of contemporary art."

Of the 48 artists featured, only a handful, including Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, David LaChapelle and Todd Gray, his former staff photographer, knew Jackson personally. Warhol, whose work with and about Jackson fills a dedicated room at the exhibition, places him firmly within the context of other mythologized cultural icons like Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe.

Nicholas Cullinan, director of the National Portrait Gallery, says this untitled piece by the late Keith Haring (1984) was a late addition to the exhibition. Haring is one of the artists featured in the exhibition to have known Jackson personally. Credit: Courtesy The Keith Haring Foundation

In a series of three pieces completed after Jackson's death, LaChapelle depicts him as a Biblical figure, posed as Michael the Archangel atop a defeated Satan and as Jesus in a tropical pieta. Gray's mixed media work incorporates juxtaposes intimate photographs of Jackson from the 1970s and '80s with portraits of black families living ordinary lives.

Others observe him from a distance. In some instances, this means reflecting on the role he plays in memories of their youth. British painter Dawn Mellor contributed a series of drawings she made as a child in the 1980s, while Graham Dolphin meticulously transcribed every lyric from Jackson's entire song catalog over the "Off the Wall" and "Thriller" album art as a meditation on fandom.

There are pieces within the exhibition that provide insight into how Jackson saw himself, too.

"Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II (Michael Jackson)," a large-scale painting by Obama portraitist Kehinde Wiley, was the last work of art commissioned by Jackson himself before his death. It features the singer as the Spanish monarch on horseback, a pose lifted from a 17th-century oil painting by Peter Paul Rubens.

The artwork for Jackson's 1991 album "Dangerous," for which Jackson commissioned painter Mark Ryden, hangs a few rooms over and incorporates the likeness of PT Barnum alongside references to revered artists like Hieronymus Bosch and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. But not every depiction is flattering. American artist Jordan Wolfson grappled with the darker side of Jackson's legacy. His piece "Neverland" (2001) whites out everything but Jackson's eyes in a 1993 video clip of the singer denying child molestation allegations, to haunting effect.

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Margo Jefferson, whose 2006 book "On Michael Jackson" examined the entertainer's rise and fall, and the cultural significance of both, believes such a nuanced examination of Jackson's impact on art is only possible now that time has passed since his death.

"The content of the life that was controversial, disturbing, unsettling, can be looked at separately, which you really couldn't do while he was alive," Jefferson, who contributed to the exhibition catalog, said in a phone interview.

"Death always allows a certain return to passions and also a certain move into a kind of critical analysis. Now, critics, writers and other artists can look at the work, which is so incredibly well-documented, and say, 'What can I learn from this?'"

Cullinan hopes visitors will come away with an understanding that there may not be only one answer to that question.

"The big takeaway is how one person could mean so many different things to all these different people," he said. "It's the realization that my idea of Michael Jackson is not necessarily right or wrong, and it could be very different from someone else's."

American artist and critic Lorraine O'Grady, whose diptychs position Jackson along the likeness of French poet Charles Baudelaire, suggests his enduring legacy in the art world may be his articulation of an artist's responsibility.

"When Michael died, I was trying to figure out, why was I crying like he was a member of my family when I was a Prince fan?" O'Grady said. "The more I understood about Michael, the more I realized the only person I could compare him to was Charles Baudelaire."

O'Grady acknowledges that, while both Jackson and Baudelaire experimented with makeup and played with notions of sexuality, their most significant shared trait was embodying the same exalted idea about the role an artist should play.

"(Jackson) felt that he was capable of uniting the entire world through music," she said. "No one ever again could have an ambition like that unironically."

This drive may be key to understanding why so many contemporary artists return to Jackson as a subject. "The amazing thing," O'Grady added, "is how fully he accomplished that goal."